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The Teacher in Transition: Learning to Let the Child Lead

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THE TEACHER IN TRANSITION: LEARNING TO LET THE CHILD LEAD

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Whole language is an interdisciplinary method of teaching which is becoming a political movement in the schools. It empowers both student and teacher, allowing the student to become self-directed and freeing the teacher from a primarily authoritarian role. Literacy activity in the whole language classroom resembles reading and writing in the real world, so that school work is seen as purposeful by students. Ideally, students plan and work cooperatively in cross-grade groupings.

In this ethnographic study of two first grade classrooms, a participant-observer identified those factors which support and hinder a teacher's transition from the traditional model of teaching to whole language orientation. Data was collected through one week of full day participation in a whole language college laboratory classroom in Georgia, and a semester-long internship with a public school teacher in Illinois who is moving from traditional commercially-driven teaching to whole language child-centered instruction. Theoretical and empirical literature, classroom observations, and teacher interviews were analyzed.

Factors identified as assisting the transition from basal to whole language instruction were: 1) a support network of administration, teachers, and parents to share information and encourage risk-taking; 2) less restriction on how time is spent throughout the day, since subjects are not drastically separated; 3) teacher's skill and experience with positive classroom management; 4) the creation of new definitions for teacher and student success, i.e., less performance-oriented, in terms of standardized measures of achievement, and more mastery-oriented, in terms of improvement, individual goal-setting, and self-examination for improvement; 5) teacher's realization that the child's writing is the best text for beginning reading instruction.

Factors found to limit the transition to whole language included: 1) the allocation of funds for workbooks and skill sheets rather than for the purchase of *real* books and quality literature; 2) school-district assessment documents geared toward the evaluation of isolated skills with standardized quantitative scores; 3) reluctance to change teaching style, take pedagogical risks, and deviate from principles taught in teacher education classes; 4) absence of unified commitment to whole language instruction among teachers, administrators, and parents; 5) failure to comprehend the political nature of whole language philosophy, e.g., giving up basal readers but not the teacher-centered classroom; 6) fear of sharing authority and responsibility, losing control of students, and changing the nature of the student-teacher relationship.